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Environmental Ethics for the Long Term: An Introduction
John Nolt
New York, NY, Routledge, 2015, xiv + 268 pp., hardcover, $130.00, paperback, $44.95 *ISBN* (hardcover) 978-0-415-53583-0; *ISBN* (paperback) 978-0-415-53584-7

John Nolt defines environmental ethics as "the attempt to expand moral thinking in two directions: beyond the human species and into the distant future" (p. xii). *Environmental Ethics for the Long Term* is an introduction to the field so conceived. The emphasis on looking toward the distant future makes the book a unique alternative to other textbooks in environmental ethics, such as Des Jardin's (2012) *Environmental Ethics*, that usually only address long-term moral concerns in a single isolated chapter. In fact, for instructors who want to teach an environmental ethics course with an emphasis on long-term intergenerational ethics, *Environmental Ethics for the Long Term* is probably a better choice than any other textbook currently available. But regardless of teaching needs, all environmental philosophers have reason to read at least chapters 6 and 7, which contain arguments that deserve rigorous philosophical examination.

The book opens with a brief preface that gives an overview of the seven chapters. Chapter 1 summarizes the empirical science concerning six major issues in environmental ethics: pollution, threats to human health, climate change, natural resource depletion, biodiversity loss, and human population and consumption. Chapter 2 covers the basics of ethical reasoning. Specifically, the chapter features sections on the fundamental concepts of logic, prescriptive

reasoning, the three most prominent types of ethical theories (deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics), and why one should care about ethics at all. In both these chapters, Nolt does not aim for comprehensiveness: his goal is only to provide students—particularly those without any philosophical background—with the tools they need to understand the remainder of the book.

One noteworthy feature of chapter 2 is that Nolt emphasizes ethical *reasoning* rather than ethical theory. Nolt views ethical theories as tools that we use to reason about how to make moral decisions. As he later acknowledges more explicitly (pp. 240–241), Nolt does not view any one ethical theory as being wholly adequate. Hence, we must employ elements of each while being mindful of their strengths and weaknesses. This outlook explains why he emphasizes our need to "think deontologically *and* consequentially" to make good moral decisions (p. 58) and appeals to non-consequentialist reasons to answer the question of why one should act ethically (p. 61) despite later endorsing consequentialist biocentrism (ch. 6).

Chapters 3–6 constitute the heart of the book, for these are the chapters where the project of expanding our moral thinking is undertaken. Nolt starts this project in chapter 3 by examining near-term, anthropocentric ethics. Several approaches are discussed under this heading (including care ethics and ecofeminism), but preference utilitarianism is given by far the longest treatment, largely because of its connection to neoclassical economics. In chapter 4, the scope of moral concern expands temporally: Nolt considers long-term, anthropocentric ethics. Topics covered here include (among many others) the moral status of future people, Stephen Gardiner's (2003) pure intergenerational problem, the non-identity problem, collective action problems, and sustainability. Further widening the scope of moral concern, Nolt addresses our moral responsibilities to nonhuman animals in chapter 5. After initially discussing how animals are currently treated and how we should view their moral status, Nolt critically evaluates many of

the leading theoretical approaches to animal ethics, including Peter Singer's (1990) utilitarianism, Tom Regan's (2004) rights-based view, Gary Varner's (2012) rule utilitarianism, Carruther's (1992) contractualism, care ethics, Holmes Rolston's (1988) views on animals, and Clare Palmer's (2010) relational ethic.

The project of expanding our moral thinking reaches its conclusion in chapter 6, where Nolt considers and defends biocentrism—"the view that all living things are morally considerable" (p. 160). After critiquing deep ecology and the biocentric views of Albert Schweitzer (1923) and Paul Taylor (1986), Nolt articulates and defends consequentialist biocentrism. Consequentialist biocentrism incorporates three types of welfare. Nonsentient organisms have only biotic welfare—the degree to which an organism is functioning in a way conducive to its survival. Sentient beings have not only biotic welfare but also hedonic welfare—"the sum of the values of their enjoyments, which count positively, and of their sufferings, which count negatively" (p. 176). In addition to these two kinds of welfare, there may be some objective goods (e.g., having knowledge) unique to human beings that must also be taken into account. After presenting the framework for consequentialist biocentrism, Nolt devotes the remainder of the chapter to defending it from objections and explaining how we can use it to make moral decisions.

Chapter 7 is primarily an attempt to answer philosophical questions that linger from prior chapters. The central question of the chapter might be phrased as follows: given how complex our ethical reasoning has become, how do we act ethically? Nolt begins with a discussion of five moral imperatives that emerge from previous chapters: eliminate unnecessary fossil fuel use, protect species and habitat, eat ethically, build a sustainable economy, and reduce human population. The next section considers two unresolved ethical questions. First, should we

generate more nuclear power? Second, what should we do about species extinctions, migrations, and so on? A few broader concerns, such as how basic moral principles are justified, are briefly treated in section 7.3. The book closes with a brief diagnosis of the current environmental crisis and some suggestions for how we should respond to it.

As a teaching text, *Environmental Ethics for the Long Term* has plenty of merits. The chapters are organized into short, tightly written sections that undergraduates with no prior exposure to philosophy should have little difficulty understanding. Additionally, arguments are frequently expressed in explicit premise-conclusion form. Since many undergraduate readers will be inexperienced in identifying and explicating philosophical arguments on their own, this presentation should greatly improve their ability to comprehend and assess the arguments. A few sections of the book—namely, those on consequentialist reasoning (§2.2.3), neoclassical economics (§3.2.1–3.2.5), and animal ethics (ch. 5)—are particularly noteworthy for their conceptual clarity and thoroughness. Section 7.1, which discusses some moral imperatives that follow from the prior chapters, is also extremely valuable: students in environmental ethics courses are always at risk of thinking that there are no clear answers regarding what we morally ought to do, and this section may help them think otherwise.

As with any tightly written textbook, there are some sections that are not as developed as every reader would prefer. In my own case, I would have liked to see a section in chapter 3 (on near-term anthropocentrism) that discussed human rights in detail, and I think the demandingness objection to consequentialism warrants a more rigorous treatment (pp. 116–117). But these are only minor shortcomings. A more noteworthy pedagogical drawback is that large portions of chapters 6 and 7 are too advanced for undergraduate students who lack significant prior exposure to philosophy: in these chapters, Nolt is writing as much for professional

philosophers as he is for students. However, these chapters are also the most philosophically interesting. Nolt's defense of consequentialist biocentrism is novel and intriguing, and he makes a commendable effort to address the problems that incomparable values pose for consequentialist environmental ethics. Nevertheless, in the space that remains, I raise two criticisms regarding Nolt's reasoning in these chapters.

My first criticism concerns Nolt's claim in chapter 6 that "lifetime welfare differences among living beings cannot be infinite" (p. 179). This claim is crucial to his account of biocentric consequentialism. If there are infinite differences between the lifetime welfares of some organisms, then Nolt's position may not be robustly biocentric. Suppose, for instance, that the lifetime welfare of a sentient being is infinitely higher than the lifetime welfare of a non-sentient being. If our goal is to promote the greatest total welfare, then whenever the welfare of sentient and non-sentient beings come into conflict, we will *always* choose to promote the welfare of the sentient beings because even if the group of non-sentient beings is enormous, their total welfare will still be less than the welfare of one sentient being. But such an ethic does not look very biocentric in its application: we will be acting almost identically to how we would act if only the welfare of sentient beings mattered.

Nolt's argument for the claim that there are no infinite differences in organisms' lifetime welfare values starts with the observation that all currently living organisms evolved from one-celled organisms with very low total welfare. At each reproductive step in an extremely long series, the parents and offspring resembled one another very closely. There could not have been any step where there was an infinite difference in value between the parents and the offspring, and a finite number of finite increases in value cannot add up to an infinite total increase. Thus,

no currently existing organism (including human beings) can have a total lifetime welfare that is infinitely higher than even the simplest microscopic organism.

The argument, despite its simplicity, is not clearly sound. There is at least one candidate for a step at which an infinite difference in value could arise: when a sentient offspring was produced by non-sentient parents. While the first sentient organisms probably did not have *much* sentience, they still possessed a morally relevant capacity that their predecessors lacked entirely. Might this step in the reproductive chain ground an infinite difference in value? I am not sure, but it is a reasonable thought. Thus, given the argument's importance, it must be given a more substantive defense than a single paragraph (pp. 179–180).

My second critical point concerns incomparable values. Two values are incomparable when "neither is in fact greater than, equal to, or less than the other" (p. 82): they are too different to allow for comparison. Incomparable values cannot be linearly ordered, and so if our goal is to promote the greatest total welfare, we are not always left with clear choices about how to accomplish this task. I believe incomparable values pose a larger threat to biocentric consequentialism than Nolt suggests. To his credit, Nolt does acknowledge and address the problems caused by incomparability (pp. 238–240), but his remarks only suggest *potential* solutions to these problems. For them to constitute genuine solutions, we need a more elaborate account of how the considerations that Nolt mentions—bounded incomparability, emergent comparability, partial orderings, and so on—can help us use consequentialist biocentrism to make plausible environmental decisions.

Nolt even admits that "rigorous application [of biocentric consequentialism] may remain impractical" even if he is right in thinking that some of the problems with incomparability can be solved (p. 181). This admission is problematic. One of Nolt's central criticisms of deontological

theories is that they have difficulty explaining what to do when moral rules conflict with one another (pp. 51, 109, 148). Other moral rules must be posited to adjudicate these conflicts. The resulting theory can become too complex to be practical. But is consequentialist biocentrism in a better position? Nolt has not decisively answered this question. His arguments do not clearly demonstrate that resolving the problem of aggregating incomparable values is any easier than constructing a workable, coherent system of moral rules.

Despite my concerns about some of Nolt's arguments, my analysis demonstrates the philosophical depth and richness of the book's final chapters. These chapters deserve more rigorous treatment than I can offer here, and they are the central reason that the book is more than just an excellent introductory textbook.

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